

Leadership Characteristics of Adult Educators

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess self-perceived leadership behaviors and related leadership styles practiced in a sample of adult educators. Adopting transformational leadership theory embodied in the Full Range of Leadership Model the leadership characteristics of adult educators were examined using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire Form 5x (Bass & Avolio, 2000). The possibility of significant differences between respondent gender, age, and their preferred leadership style was also explored. The entire membership ($n = 199$) of a regional professional association of adult educators was sent a mailed questionnaire. A total of 124 surveys were returned representing a 63% response rate. Results showed that transformational leadership was greater than the mean for transactional leadership which in turn was greater than the mean for laissez-faire leadership. An examination of gender differences in leadership profiles showed that females tended to be more transformational whereas males reported higher transactional scores. The laissez-faire leadership style tended to be higher for females but of the three leadership types only transactional produced a significant gender difference. No statistical significant difference was found with leadership and age. The findings are discussed for their implications for professional development and the future leadership of the adult education field.

Introduction

Leadership is described as being one of social science's most examined phenomena (Antonakis, Cianciolo, & Sternberg, 2004). Yet, little is known of the leadership characteristics of those who work in the field of adult education. Shoemaker (1998) suggested that leadership is difficult to characterize as the field is punctured by inconclusive definitions as to the role and function of leadership. Rose (1992) noted that adult education could learn from and build on models of leadership from other fields. This study sought to add to existing knowledge by describing leadership characteristics among a sample of adult educators.

The continuing professionalization of the adult education field (Brockett, 1989; Cervero, 1985; 1987) offers an opportunity to apply new theoretical developments in leadership theory to gain an improved understanding of leadership profiles that currently exist among adult educators. Consequently, this information could be utilized to identify potential opportunities for current and future leadership development. As Marceau (2003) described, adult educators come from a variety of backgrounds and perform their work in a variety of sectors. Further, "many of these adult educators do not have formal preparation in teaching their content area to adults but have acquired experience and expertise through on-the-job training, mentoring, self-study, and staff development" (Marceau, p. 68). This diversity in professional preparation requires that the field deliver a consistent and constant offering of professional development opportunities (Kutner & Tibbetts, 1997). A growing part of professional development centers on leadership with calls for adult education to be more concerned about leadership as understood from the perspective of adult and continuing educators (Fleming & Caffarella, 2000).

The latest chapter in the almost 100 year history of leadership research is dominated by the development of transformational leadership theory embodied in the Full Range of Leadership Model (Antonakis, et al., 2004; Bass, 1998). This approach to leadership focuses on the charismatic and affective elements of leadership. Northouse (2004) described transformational leadership as “a process that changes and transforms individuals. It is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals, and includes assessing followers’ motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as full human beings” (p. 169). Furthermore, as Bass (1985) advocated, by engaging in transformational leadership behaviors a leader transforms followers. In reality this means that “followers are changed from being self-centered individuals to being committed members of a group. They are then able to perform at levels far beyond what normally might have been expected” (Antonakis, et al., 2004, p. 175).

The model of transformational leadership includes a continuum of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire forms of leadership. Each form characterizes aspects of the dynamic process of interaction between leader and follower but identifies certain patterns and features to distinguish transformational leadership from transactional and laissez-faire styles (Avolio, 1999). The transformational leader pays particular attention to others’ needs, which, in turn, raises followers’ levels of motivation (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1998). Furthermore, a leader of this type encourages others to reach their full potential while also adopting a strong ethical characteristic. Whereas, transactional leaders “approach followers with an eye to exchanging one thing for another” (Burns, 1978, p. 4) with the leader’s use of either reward or punishment contingent on the follower’s completion or non-completion of assigned tasks. Laissez-faire leadership involves indifference and avoidance as a leader with this profile will “avoid making decisions, abdicate responsibilities, divert attention from hard choices, and will talk about getting down to work, but never really does” (Bass, 1998, p. 148).

Clearly a transformational leadership style would seem well suited to adult educators. Yet the extent to which adult educators’ exhibit characteristics associated with transformational leadership is not known. Using the Full Range of Leadership Model a sample of adult educators from a variety of different educational background and employment settings were selected to gather data on the profile of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership to address the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do practitioners in adult education describe their leadership style?

Research Question 2: Are there significant differences in the way practitioners in adult education describe their leadership style by gender?

Research Question 3: Are there significant differences in the way practitioners in adult education describe their leadership style by age?

Method

This quantitative study utilized a survey research design to gather information from a sample of current members of a regional adult education professional association. This section reports on the sample, research instrument, and data analysis.

Sample

The sample for this study came from an adult education professional association that serves a multi-state area in the Midwest. This organization is recognized as the oldest regional

adult education association in the United States of America. The list of all current members served as the sampling frame. The entire membership of 199 was invited to participate in the study with initial contact made by a cover letter and accompanying self-administered survey. A total of 124 complete and useable responses (62% response rate) were received. Respondents were 69% female ($n = 85$ female and $n = 39$ male) with more than 70% aged 50 years or above.

Instrument

The research instrument consisted of the two demographic items of interest, namely gender and age which was measured in ten-year increments, along with version 5 of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass & Avolio, 2000). This instrument is now widely regarded as being a highly valid and reliable method to determine the profile of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership characteristics of individuals Northouse (2004). Responses for the leadership profile are reported on a 5-point Likert-type scale with anchors 4 = “frequently, if not always”, 3 = “fairly often”, 2 = “sometimes”, 1 = “once in a while”, and 0 = “not at all”. A total of 45 questions ask respondents to describe their leadership style as they perceive it.

Data Analysis

The research instrument scores respondents leadership profile on nine factors. The first five factors determine the degree to which an individual is a transformational leader, the following three factors are for transactional leadership, and the last factor is for the laissez-faire approach to leadership. An individual’s score is determined by summing the items relating to the factors to produce a final score for each leadership style. Higher scores on factors 1 through 5 would indicate that an individual more frequently displays transformational leadership. For this study the sub-factors were only used to record a final score for transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership. To examine significant differences in leadership by gender and age the Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney U tests were used.

Results

This study found the mean for transformational leadership (3.27) was greater than the mean for transactional leadership (1.95), which in turn was greater than the mean for laissez-faire leadership (.79). Table 1 presents the summary of the MLQ mean and grand mean scores for the nine factors along with the three leadership styles. These scores indicated that this sample of adult educators reflected an optimal leadership profile. To explore if differences existed between leadership types and gender a Mann-Whitney U test was used. The mean score of transformational leadership was higher for females (3.29) than males (3.22). For transactional leadership male respondents reported a mean score of 2.05 compared to 1.91 for females. The mean score for laissez-faire leadership was .80 for females and .73 for males. Of the three leadership types only transactional produced a significant gender difference. No statistical significant difference was found with leadership and age although younger respondents tended to be less transformational. To show a statistically significant relationship between age and leadership style using the Kruskal-Wallis Test, a significance level of .05 or less was needed (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990). The results showed that the significance level for transformational leadership ($p = 0.06$) may indicate that some differences may exist between age and transformational leadership whereas transactional leadership ($p = 0.26$), and laissez-faire

leadership ($p = 0.68$) produced much lower significance levels.

Table 1.
Summary of the MLQ Mean and Grand Mean Scores

Scale	Mean	Grand Mean
Idealized influence (Attributed)	3.15	
Idealized influence (Behavioral)	3.15	
Inspirational Motivation	3.40	
Intellectual Stimulation	3.19	
Individualized Consideration	3.47	
Transformational Leadership		3.27
Contingent Reward	3.31	
Management by Exception (Active)	1.34	
Management by Exception (Passive)	1.27	
Transactional Leadership		1.95
Laissez-faire Leadership		.79

Note: $n = 124$.

Conclusion

Leadership will likely remain an important issue for adult education practitioners as the field continues to evolve and adapt to external demands. The findings from this study suggest that the profession of adult education is dominated by individuals who show characteristics associated with transformational leadership. One attribute of transformational leadership is an ability to bridge divergent interests and to articulate a shared vision (Bass, 1998). This study indicated that the field may have a stronger unified leadership voice than might be expected. The tendency of transformational leaders to act collaboratively may provide a unifying thread of shared leadership which would be useful in building a collective voice and assist in the professionalization of the field. Furthermore, a characteristics of transformational leaders is that they promote the development of leadership in others (Avolio, 1999). The field of adult education is often under-represented and undervalued (Brockett, 1998) so the realization that a reservoir of transformative leaders already exists may help future leadership within individual areas of responsibility as well as the broad field of adult education.

The finding of non significant gender or age differences in transformational leadership is generally consistent with literature (Bass, 1998). The result with gender, while not producing a statistically significant difference, does suggest that women are in general as transformational, if not more so, than men. However, it is important to note that literature on this subject is far from comprehensive and the differences in gender and the Full Leadership Model have yet to be fully explored (Maher, 1997). Similarly the association between transformational leadership and age failed to produce a significant result although the age profile of the sample was highly skewed. Additional analysis did show that those aged over 50 tended to have heightened levels of transformational leadership when compared to the younger age groups. This raises the question of do adult educators become more transformation at the later stages of their career or are individuals who tend to show transformative leadership behaviors drawn to the field of adult education? Again, future research is needed in this area.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this study suggest that adult educators tend towards a transformative leadership style which bodes well for the future of the field. Yet, the question remains if adult educators are fully leveraging the opportunities resulting from their leadership abilities for the benefit of their individual career, the organizations and communities in which they live and work, and the profession. A key feature of the Full Leadership Model is that transformational leadership has a cascading effect (Bass, 1998; Bass & Avolio, 1994) with transformational leaders developing these same attributes in others. This suggests that the field has reason to be optimistic about its future as this study indicates a level of transformational leadership is in place to provide effective shared leadership and to help develop the leadership potential of those new to adult education. Individuals with this leadership type will add value as the field of adult education continues the move towards becoming more professionalized.

Of course, the results of this study must be interpreted with acknowledgment to the limitations, primarily the small sample size and reliance on members from one professional association. It is hoped that future studies in this area could use a larger and perhaps national population of adult educators. Yet, a strength of this study is the wide variety of locations of respondents and the fact that this professional association has members from a diverse range of organizational types and adult education settings.

This research could provide a benchmarking opportunity for both individual adult educators and their professional associations to chart leadership development. This approach to applied research could also be combined with professional development at conferences and workshops to provide opportunities for adult educators at different career stages including students in university adult education programs. Additional research that would also benefit the field would include an examination to determine why adult educators tend to show transformative leadership behaviors and how they compare to educators in other settings (e.g., public school teachers, corporate human resource development professionals). Such research would benefit from both quantitative longitudinal research designs as well as in-depth interpretative studies.

The final implication for practice relates to the use of existing leadership theory as compared to the development of leadership theory for adult education. As Fleming and Caffarella (2000) noted, leadership development should be concerned with both the relationship of personal dimensions of leadership to broad purposes and contexts as well as the responsible development of ethically and critically reflective leaders. The continued development of the Full Leadership Model and the greater understanding emerging from a growing body of literature may suggest that adult education is a well-suited environment for the study of transformative leadership and how it can be developed.

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